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ABSTRACT

Excerpts from transcribed tape recordings of conversations between two reading specialists and 23 Hispanic inmates at a New Jersey correctional institution reveal that many of these inmates believe that a lack of functional literacy was partly responsible for their present condition. Literacy, then, might be a valuable tool for preventing recidivism among these and similar inmates. Because traditional methods of reading instruction have not been successful with the student-inmate, a new approach is necessary. One such approach is Easy Steps to Reading Improvement (ESTRI), a method of teaching decoding skills and vocabulary development. ESTRI teaches one systematic approach to word decoding and teaches no exceptions to the rules. It holds that word decoding is not a part of the reading process itself, since no one reads for the purpose of decoding words. ESTRI capitalizes on the listening abilities of learners and leads them to mastery of the decoding process, an essential adjunct to intelligent and independent reading. Through the use of this approach, inmates can develop the necessary reading skills for successfully meeting the demands placed upon them by society. (FL)

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LITERACY: A TOOL FOR ASSISTING THE HISPANIC INMATE

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LITERACY: A TOOL FOR ASSISTING THE HISPANIC INMATE

INTRODUCTION

Prior means of attempting to meet the needs of the inmate are discussed. They have not proved satisfactory. The handicap of illiteracy has dogged the inmate from his earliest years setting up a pattern of frustration and failure which has contributed to his asocial activities.

This article traces the inmate from his position as an unhappy schoolboy, a juvenile delinquent, a prison inmate.

A new reading program called Easy Steps to Reading Independence (ESTRI) might offer a solution for some inmates. Its procedure is briefly described in the article.

Actual conversations which have been transcribed from a taped interview with Hispanic inmates at the Essex County Correctional Institution point to the fact that many inmates suffer from lack of functional literacy. Of twenty-three inmates interviewed, many claimed that illiteracy was the handicap that was responsible for their present incarceration.

In April of 1979, Dr. Jo-Ann Sainz and Catherine Biggins, a reading specialist, decided to visit the New Jersey Correctional Institution to get direct feedback from inmates. Lieutenant Thompson and Oscar Marchant, bilingual teacher at the Institution, arranged for a meeting with the inmates.

Consider the remarks made by these inmates:

When I had reading problems, they put me in a special class. I always felt dumb, slow-like. Then I said to myself, "Ain't no hope." I always thought I was dumb. Then I got involved in drugs and that is what shot me back down again. I was in jail. I was sent to jail. I got married a couple of years ago. Had a baby girl. I was slow in my work, brought me up to the country school, special class, training school. That place was bad. The teachers, when you did wrong, beat you with rulers. (What is your reading level?) I couldn't write like. Couldn't read or write, couldn't spell that well. I married while I was up here.

I'm 21 years old. Be getting out in five weeks. When I walk out of this door, I plan to move back to my family in Illinois. The other half is in Puerto Rico. I didn't go to bilingual program in school. Didn't learn in both languages. I went to 9th grade. I was scared of the teachers. I quit school and went to work. I had problems with teachers. The teacher told me I was bad. Everything messed up on me. I moved away from my family when I was 18. Came here, did bad things. I didn't learn English in school. I learned English on the street, word by word, television. I didn't get the GED.

I quit school. I checked out after second grade. I was young, liked to play. They threw me out of school completely. Came here when I was 17. In school I never know about bilingual program. Drugs, LSD, heroin, worse habit you can have. I couldn't study with that. I have a beautiful dream, get married, be Puerto Rican. There's a problem I have. I will go crazy here. I don't want to go crazy. I don't want to see the family. They say we are monkeys like. I don't like to stay here. They say we are stupid. I know what I am. I want to learn, speak English. The program here is okay, but I got holds. You can't come out when you are in hold. They give me a job inside. I learned English without school.

I was born in Puerto Rico. Came here in '69. I dropped out of school in 6th grade. Haven't gone back since. When I was on the street I was trying to get into a reading program in the night. There are eight kinds in the family. I'm the oldest one. I had to be looking out for the other kids. I got my sister a job before I got locked up. The school had a bilingual program but I didn't go. (What made you drop out of school?) I had to look out for my family. There was a lot of trouble in school with drugs, always fighting. The principal kept sending me home all the time. The bilingual program would have helped me read. I signed up for the GED program here but the people didn't call me. I'm trying to get myself together because when I was out I was doing good. I want to attend school at night. I want to get the GED. I want to get it while I'm here. My

reading level? Both languages I'm real good. I write them. For somebody who had not gone to school so much, I know a lot. (What kind of work would you like to do after you get your GED?) When I was out in the street I was painting. I can use reading when I go back painting to read books about painting.

One could analyze the predicament of incarcerated inmates in terms of economic factors, environmental factors, factors contributing to "culture shock," genetic factors, or perhaps even literacy. The thesis of the present article is that literacy might be a valuable tool for preventing recidivism.

Certainly, unless the method of treatment for the illiterate or semi-illiterate inmate changes, the rate of recidivism will likely remain very high. These sentiments have been voiced through oral interviews by heads of corrections institutions, among them, Lieutenant Thompson of the Essex County Corrections Center in Caldwell, New Jersey. Consider a quote by Agenor Castro:

In New York State, for instance, the number of Hispanics serving sentences on felony convictions (one year or more) rose from 11 percent to 18 percent of the total inmate population in the past five years. In the past year the number of Hispanic inmates climbed 17 percent in New York to over 4000 men and women (Castro, 1977.)

The major reason for the general ignorance about Hispanic offenders is that almost no socio-psychological instruments or tools have been developed which accurately measure or particularize their plight in the criminal justice system. Now, due to the urgency of numbers, the need for researching this phenomenon and coming up with some relevant yardstick has become a priority.

Undoubtedly, the inmate has been examined as to what "got him into trouble" with the law in the first place. But the

question is how to free him from the crushing circle of recidivism which finds him back in a state of incarceration. The present writers feel that precious time has been lost in viewing psychotherapy as the solution. What he/she needs specific tools which will, it is assumed, empower ability to pursue greater options. The ability to read on a functionally literate level is of primary importance. How is one to sustain oneself as an illiterate or semi-illiterate in a literate society?

The present writers have seen inmates progress from being illiterate to passing the G.E.D diploma and successfully continuing on to college. Both investigators have seen excellent responses in corrections institutions.

The present paper examines the traditional method of reading instruction, exposes serious shortcomings of these methods, and then examines one solution to addressing these shortcomings: the ESTRI method.

Case Study

Brought to mind is the case of Bob, a 20-year-old inmate of a penitentiary. Bob angrily demanded what the interviewer would do if she could neither read nor write, suggesting that this was the case in question. Bob had been imprisoned for assault and robbery. Bob's literacy, which tested at second-grade level, had forced him to accept menial positions in the labor force, overruling his hope to better his options.

Case Study

Ralph, an inmate of a corrections center in New Jersey, was reading on the second-grade level. He voiced frustration at his inability to remember all the words which he would be

required to recognize visually if he were to read at a level commensurate with his interests.

Whether these men, or others like them, would have turned to lives of crime, even if equipped educationally to obtain a satisfactory position in the job field, is a moot question, needing further research. The status quo reflects their being mal-adjusted educationally and, too, that attempts to rehabilitate inmates have been shallow because the educational system is inadequately addressing their needs.

The Problem in Terms of Reading Proficiency

Cases such as the ones cited describe the inability to acquire functional reading proficiency because of the inability to decode the word on the printed page. Many words that form a part of the subjects' listening, speaking vocabulary are a mystery in the printed form. It is easily understood that, unless the inmate can read the printed page, many areas of literature, including job manuals, are closed to him. How many job manuals are, or can be, reduced to easy-to-read editions? How many employers are willing to hire an employee who must have a printed message pre-digested for him before he can interpret its meaning?

As Ralph found, he couldn't remember all the words he learned by memory. The strain on his memory was too great at this point of his life. Why didn't these incarcerated persons master the reading process while they were going to school? Any number of reasons for this is possible. Some might have been too mentally immature when they started school. Some, coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, might have been caught up in emotional or intellectual blocks in their early grades, unable to concentrate on school work. Others had English as a second language.

Having reached adulthood without functional reading ability, are these adults doomed to illiteracy for the rest of their lives and is society, therefore, to be threatened by possibilities of their antisocial acts? It would seem that the educational world has not addressed the needs of these people and, in general, seems to be closing the door on these people.

Word Attack Skills and Inherent Limitations

Word recognition, or decoding, skills are a prime factor for consideration because they form the stepping stones on which depend development and growth in the reading process itself. Word recognition skills present a multiplicity of approaches with many "exceptions to the rules." This means that in a great many cases the word decoding skills are not of much help. The learner, it is suggested, should be equipped to use a diversity of word-attack skills, since no two students learn to read in the same way.

Smith (1968, 1971), Spache (1963, 1976), Stauffer (1968, 1970) and Strang (1957), among others, discuss word-recognition skills. Among the word-recognition components are configuration clues, picture clues, context clues, phonetic analysis, structural analysis, and combination of clues.

The configuration of a word is its pattern, general form, or shape. The difficulty inherent in applying this skill can be seen when words like "saw" and "was," "these"-"those," "horse"-"house" are compared. The pairs have practically the same shape.

Picture clues usually are effective and efficient only with the learner at a reading-skill-development level that makes any

other word-attack skill too difficult; picture clues should probably be used only with learners too young or too unskilled to use any of the other techniques of acquiring an unknown word as part of their reading vocabulary. The word "t r e e" will only invoke a mental-picture response if the student first recognizes the combination of letters to stand for the word "tree." A picture of an object can have many synonyms. Which one would be right? And isn't it imperative in the world of work that the exact meaning of a message be understood by those whom it concerns? As an example, a picture of a boat could be described by words "boat," "ship," "vessel," "barge," "liner." Then there are other words to consider, those that do not invoke mental pictures, such as "a," "the," "where," "while."

The context clue is a means of identifying a new reading word by anticipation of the meaning or through the words and ideas adjacent to the new word. The difficulty here is obvious when one considers the problem that arises when the learner doesn't know enough of the surrounding words to "guess" the unknown word from context. Couldn't a mistaken "guess" at a word have, at times, unfortunate effects?

Considering the make-up of the word itself, phonetic analysis involves identifying the written word through analysis, and then synthesis, of the letters making up the word. Some of the subskills of phonetic analysis are single-letter sounds, letter combinations, special sounds, syllables, speaking patterns, similar beginnings and endings of words, letter sounds related to their position within words (initial, medial, or final).

However, the word itself is a mystery to learners until they have committed it to memory, and the multiplicity of things they should be aware of is often ensnaring. Some questions that could arise are How does a person recognize the syllables in the word unless he already recognizes the word itself? Many words do not break up neatly into beginning, medial, and final syllables; how can learners recognize the beginning and final syllables? Will learners be confused as to where the middle of the word is?

Structural analysis involves identifying words through the analysis of the subparts of those words. Some subskills under structural analysis are recognizing derivatives (root words, affixes, suffixes, prefixes), word patterns, variants, compound words, and syllable recognition.

It is thought by the writers of this paper that the combination of clues confuse average and slow learners, whether children or adults, since there is nothing in the word to suggest what method to use in decoding a particular word. The many "exceptions to the rules" have convinced many students, especially the older ones, that there is no use learning the rules because they could not be sure of what rule to apply in decoding a certain word. Moreover, they can not be sure that, if they had chosen ~~the~~ correct rule, the word they are trying to decode was an exception to the rule they had chosen to apply.

This seems like a dead-end for those who have not mastered the reading process by the time they are adults. This population includes those incarcerated in jail.

The Prison Inmate

A composite picture of the typical male inmate reveals that he is disproportionately from a racial or ethnic minority, under 25, from a broken home, married, without a high school education, and lacking employment skills and experience. He comes from areas which breed crime, with inadequate housing, delapidated and ineffective schools, heavy drug usage and unemployment (Bachman, 1971).

The asocial adult stems from the troubled juvenile delinquent. More immediate causes of delinquency are to be found in the decline of the family as the primary institution of social control, the inability of the school to meet the needs of urban youth, and the intrinsic vulnerability of adolescents to social change and conflict.

The Juvenile Delinquent

More difficult to remediate is the family situation, with its many ramifications. A major thrust must necessarily be placed upon meeting the needs of those students unable to progress adequately in reading because they lack facility in strict logical reasoning, persistency of effort, and good memory, qualities assumed to be essential in the mastery of reading (Capponi, 1974). The techniques used in the schools for developing reading ability include these very areas which cause frustration.

There seems to be a tie-in between juvenile delinquency and non-readers. There is a possible relation between reading disabilities and delinquency in that juvenile delinquents have been found to be three years behind in the basic skills of reading and problem solving for math. Dentter (1968) found that disturbed delinquent boys had the lowest high school rank,

while delinquent girls ranked slightly higher.

The juvenile delinquent population evidences a negative self concept and a low frustration tolerance. Common observations are that the school fails to meet the needs of certain juveniles. These juveniles are, as a consequence, taught to be frustrated by their school experiences and engage in behavior indicative of future delinquency. Tardiness, truancy, school vandalism, poor academic performance, especially in reading, classroom disruption, and dropping out are typically said to be the results of school-induced frustration, and this frustration is thought to lead ultimately to delinquent behavior (Hammer, 1970).

English as a Second Language

How much more compounded then, is the plight of the Hispanic who has the additional burden of mastering English as a second language. Linguistic and cultural differences are obstacles to national unity and to full participation by all groups in national life. Traditional instruction in ESOL failed to fulfill the need of the student in the second language, in those instances where it has taught words and structures in and of themselves. Methodology based on what we know about building language acquisition are

- minimize the role of rote memorization and meaningless drill;

- introduce second language data, including drill practice, only in meaningful contexts;

- maximize the positive transfer of what is known in the first language to the second; and

- minimize interference between the two systems.

Language is systematic. It consists of recurrent elements which occur in regular patterns of relationships (Saville-Troike, 1977). Schools should make an effort to provide as much commonality in curriculum organization and text book selection as is possible across district and state boundaries.

The North Carolina Law and Order Division recommendations on juvenile delinquency suggest that more extensive educational and counseling programs should be developed within local communities; that additional youth service bureaus and centers should be created; that physical placement facilities for juveniles should be improved; and that after-care treatment programs should be expanded. It is necessary to assess, mentor, and remediate the educational deficits found in the majority of our delinquent youth. The prevention and control of delinquency largely requires measures to remedy deficiencies in the primary agencies of socialization--the family and the school (Laken, 1973).

Need for Continuance

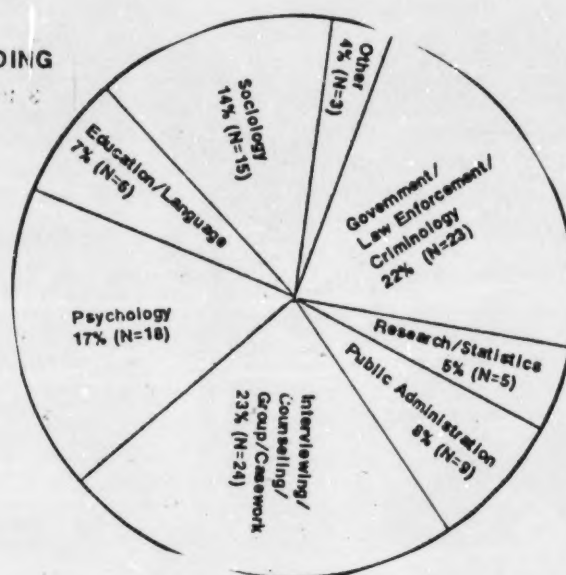
Lack of bilingual instructors and counselors is a critical priority and will remain so for some time to come. Therefore, community groups will need to be marshalled to a greater degree than has previously been the case. Program writers must begin thinking of bilingual programs which can REACH OUT to the community, either while the inmate is confined or to continue his program when released. This is especially necessary for inmates who do not speak good English, who may start their English instruction in prison but obviously must continue language proficiency instruction after their release. This equally applies

to vocational programs which, because of the extreme shortage of bilingual shop teachers, almost entirely exclude Hispanic inmates who have no English familiarity.

If we examine the following chart listing total allocations to substantive areas of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, we will find that only 7% in the final analysis is allocated to education/language.

PROBATION EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP FUNDING
September 1, 1974 to August 31, 1975

(N. J. State Law Enforcement
Planning Agency, 1977)



Although treatment is provided in the form of counseling and casework, these forms of aid do not remediate the inmate's inadequacy as a functional illiterate. This handicap severely limits the individual, making re-entry into the corrections institution inevitable.

Inadequacy of Traditional Methods

Needs of the typical male inmate of 25 years or under to become literate are not met by the traditional methods of teaching reading, which include logical reasoning, persistency of effort and good memory. His needs are immediate. Word attack skills

do not present any consistent logic. Persistency of effort is stalemated by the labyrinth of rules, as pointed out earlier in this paper. Too, it would be impossible for the inmate to memorize all the words to meet his needs in society.

The ESTRI Approach to Basic Reading

Another program, which differs dramatically from the traditional, might prove to be a way out. The educational field might turn its attention to this area, providing materials and help at rehabilitation through the program called Easy Steps to Reading Independence (ESTRI), published by Technique Learning Corporation, New York. It teaches one systematic approach to word decoding and teaches no exceptions to the rules. It holds that word decoding is not a part of the reading process itself, since no one reads for the purpose of decoding words. It suggests that a uniform skill, which can be applied to every word the learner doesn't know, enables the learner to master word decoding at a much faster pace, in a process similar to that of a person learning the skill of typing. The more the learner practices the skill, the more efficient he becomes in its application.

The one thing that is uniform about every word--that it is made up of syllables, word parts--forms the basis for ESTRI's systematic word decoding skill. The students are first introduced to the consideration of length of words through an oral presentation where they hear and distinguish word parts through the building up and comparison with other words of the word "know," "know ing," "know ing ly," "un know ing ly." The learner is taught to identify syllables in unknown words by

counting the vowels in the word according to certain rules. There are five rules for identifying syllables in words: (1) When there is only one vowel in the word, there is only one syllable, (cup . The vowels are letters of the alphabet a, e, i, o, u). (2) When two vowels come together in a word, count them as one vowel sound (boat). (3) When "e" comes at the end of a word, do not count it (hom~~e~~). (4) When r comes right after a vowel, count r as part of the vowel (car). (5) "Y" is a vowel when it is not the first letter in a word (toy). "W" is a vowel when it is not part of a consonant blend (dw, sw, tw) and is not the first letter in a word (snow).

In the ESTRI program exceptions to the rules are handled through a reversible rule: "If the vowel doesn't make its long sound in a word, make it say its short sound; and if a vowel doesn't make its short sound in a word, make it say its long sound." Thus, although learners are taught that the vowel closest to final e in a word makes its long sound, when they come to a word such as "g i v e," they decode the word according to the rule and get a long pronunciation for the vowel. Learners realize that the word is not this, or they are told so by the teacher. The rule handling "exceptions" tells them to change the vowel to its short sound. When they do, they arrive at the correct pronunciation of the word.

In the case of the word "p a p e r," upon first decoding the word and getting a short sound for a (the vowel by itself makes its short sound), the learner changes short a to long a sound arrives at the correct pronunciation of the word.

Learners are taught that the vowel "y" sounds "i" in a two-or-three-letter word and "e" in a four-or-more-letter word. When an exception to the rule arises, they apply the reversible rule. Thus, having decoded "a n y" (a three-letter word) to read "ani," through hearing, previous inclusion in their vocabulary, or being told by the teacher that "y" doesn't sound "i" here, they change the "i" sound to "e" and arrive at the correct pronunciation of the word. When learners first decode the word "j u s t i f y" to read "justife" ("y" sounds "e" in a four-or-more-letter word), they substitute the "i" sound for vowel "y" and get the correct pronunciation of the word. Exercises for vocabulary enrichment and building up of experiential background are developed while the student is learning the decoding process.

The ESTRI approach utilizes numerous individualized drawings in its auditory and visual approach to word decoding. Consonants, as they are introduced into ESTRI, are first shown in boldface print and are, therefore, easily recognizable.

Learners are also taught that wherever the consonant appears in a word and is sounded, they should make it sound its distinctive sound, eliminating consideration of positions of "beginning," "medial," "ending." When learners first meet a word, even though it is not familiar to them, they will know something about it. They will be able to determine the number of syllables in the word according to the rules for counting syllables. As learners master more of the phonetic elements of the language (consonants and vowels), they will know how many syllables the word contains and the sounds of the learned letters. Soon learners using ESTRI get to the point where,

having learned to blend sounds together, they are able to apply this skill to decode any word they do not recognize by sight.

The ESTRI program provides blending exercises. Thus, in using the vowel as a pivot, learners arrive at either the word itself or a syllable of a word on which are built longer words. For instance, blending the consonants onto short "a" sound, learners hear and say "a...", "ba...", "ca...", "da...", "fa...", "ga...", "ha...", "ja...",...and are taught how to blend other consonants onto these stems to make words..."aa..." at, am, an, and, add, or "ba..." bad, bat, bang, bath.

Learners are then taught to blend syllables together to make longer words, such as "banana" ("ba" is the first syllable); "cabbage" ("ba" appears in the second syllable), "abandon" ("a" and "ba" appear in the first and second syllables). In every word learners are taught to apply the decoding process by asking: "How many syllables are in this word?" They arrive at this answer by counting the vowels. They blend the syllables together the way they come in the word. The learner's ability to blend syllables together has been strengthened through exercises provided in the ESTRI program. Having arrived at the aural-oral pronunciation of the word, comprehension of its meaning will depend on whether the word is a part of the learner's listening and speaking vocabulary. If the word is not part of his vocabulary, the learner can, at the time he decodes the word, be told the meaning of the word, or he can look up its meaning in the dictionary.

Having the decoding process reduced to a systematic, flexible procedure, the learners' mind is freed to word on becoming functionally literate. Durrell (1956) states that reading abilities for illiterate or semi-illiterate persons are about ten percent of their listening comprehension. As reading abilities develop, reading comprehension approaches listening comprehension. The ability to understand spoken English demonstrates that learners have the intelligence and perceptual abilities to handle words and sentences, the basis for all communication abilities: speaking, reading, and writing. ESTRI capitalizes on the listening abilities of learners and leads them to mastery of the decoding process, an essential adjunct to intelligent and independent reading. Other variables in longer language units are those of vocabulary, sentence length, sentence complexity, number of ideas, degree of abstractness, relationships between ideas, inferences, classifications, order, significance, and other higher mental processes. Learners are enabled to concentrate on these higher processes as they develop the decoding skill, since, from the beginning, they are not handicapped through the requirement of a basic sight vocabulary. More practical plans can thus be made to give the inmate the necessary reading skills for successfully meeting the demands placed upon him by society.

Benefits to Awareness Organizations

New York State has over 100 authorized inmate groups, running the gamut from Jaycees to NAACP, from Alcoholics Anonymous to Accion Boricua (Puerto Rican) and other racial or nationality

awareness organizations. Each group is sponsored to some extent by an outside organization, largely made up of volunteers who provide the necessary linkage with the community which inmates (or administrators) themselves cannot provide. Volunteers visit with groups on a regular schedule to provide programs, assist in meetings or give pre-release support. At times they also provide some type of funding for organizational events, act as liaison with community resources and lend job finding expertise. Many of the volunteers who work with these inmates are minority group citizens and women. But, to what extent is literacy dealt with in these centers or agencies?

✓ It might be unrealistic to assume that improved reading instruction will cure recidivism or impact upon this syndrome totally; we know too little about why and how the syndrome operates and its effect on individual prisoners. We do know, however, that success in reading and the attainment of minimal intellectual and social standards of achievement are closely related to success in meeting employment opportunities, in sustaining family relationships, and in accepting civic and social responsibilities normally expected of all citizens.

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